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Dr. Michael Miller, left, is founder of Animetrics, and Paul Schuepp is president and chief executive officer. (BART BACHMAN PHOTO)

Face to face with the future

Jackson company is taking the technology of facial recognition to another dimension

By Bart Bachman
The Conway Daily Sun

JACKSON — They come from different parts of the world, in some cases. They have traveled different professional roads, and carry different suitcases of knowledge. But the people at Animetrics Inc., have one thing in common.

"We're all geeks," says Paul Schuepp, president and chief executive officer.

Very smart geeks at that. And by putting their heads together, they are revolutionizing the technology of facial recognition used for identification and security.

Animetrics was founded in October 2002 by Dr. Michael Miller, a Jackson resident and director of imaging science at John Hopkins University in Baltimore. Miller started on his own developing 3-D technology for facial recognition, then teamed resident, Dick Devellian, up with another Jackson to take the concept to a business level. They recruited Schuepp, whom Devellian had met on a bicycle trip in France. Schuepp had 30 years experience in the field of information technology and telecommunications, primarily in sales and business development. He jumped at the chance to help launch Animetrics.

"I fell in love with it — the idea and the concept," Schuepp says. "And I had always wanted to do a startup from scratch."

This past spring, Animetrics was converted to a C-corporation, and the principals set out to raise the money needed to advance the research and get a product to market. Their original target was \$1 million, but "we decided we needed \$2 million to get us to work in the black in 2005," Schuepp says. So far, \$1.3 million has been raised, and most of that has come from investors living in the Jackson area. Devellian himself anted up \$100,000 in seed money "to get us started," Schuepp says, adding, "We need a whole lot more of those \$100,000 people."

Getting the company in the black in 2005 is obviously dependent on revenues as well. Schuepp expects to start seeing revenues in the fourth quarter of this year.

"Revenues will come in two ways this year," Schuepp says. "One is grant money that agencies have available to develop technology. We also plan to have the first commercial version of our product. We think we'll be able to sell one or two licenses by the end of the year."

The longer-term potential is staggering. The market for facial recognition this year is \$144 million. That is expected to grow to \$1 billion in five years.

Schuepp hopes to be at the forefront of that explosion. The technology being developed upstairs at the former Red Fox Pub location in Jackson Village is literally taking facial recognition to another dimension.

"Today's facial recognition works in two-dimensional space only," Schuepp says. "We add the use of 3-D imaging to correct for lighting and pose and expressions. We still take a standard 2-D picture, but we turn it into a 3-D image. That's the magic right there. Once we have a 3-D image, we can manipulate it with more technology software. The first thing we do is correct the pose, the second thing we do is normalize the lighting across the entire face, and the third thing we do is normalize the expression."

The result is a more accurate and reliable image.

"Our hope is that facial recognition will eventually replace finger scanning, because it's the best biometric," Schuepp says. "It's more alluring, more cost-effective and it's unobtrusive."

Government and law-enforcement agencies are the "target market" for the Animetrics software. The FBI, CIA, Department of Defense and other agencies are keeping a close eye on an 18-month Facial Recognition Grand Challenge sponsored by the National Institute of Standards and Technology. Animetrics is one of 11 companies taking part.

"If we're successful with this, we'll hit the map in a big way," Schuepp says. "All of these agencies are very interested in the results and in what technologies will surface."

Animetrics is also working with the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children to help locate missing children. The Animetrics software is used to scan Internet videos and give facial recognition to the children in the videos.

Schuepp says Animetrics will not be selling directly to the end users, but instead to companies that install security and identification systems for the end users, such as government agencies, state licensing bureaus, airports and casinos. Companies that build and sell security systems might integrate Animetrics software into their total packages.

"All of these companies could be our customers rather than our competition," Schuepp says.

Animetrics presently has a team of six people, plus three summer interns. In addition to Schuepp and Miller, the team includes Dr. Guoqiang "Gary" Zang (senior scientific programmer); William Hoffman (project and product development manager); Joe Aliperti (software engineer); and Sean Doucette (quality control engineer).

By the end of the year, Schuepp plans to hire three more "PhD-level" people along with someone to help with sales and business development.

"We plan to continue hiring people not necessarily with many years of experience but with a good level of education," Schuepp says. "The people we have here are the top of their class."

Schuepp says the draw for other top programmers and scientists to be involved in the project is the opportunity to work with Dr. Miller in a beautiful setting. "We're leveraging that," he says.

More information about Animetrics is available on the Web site, www.animetrics.com. Phone number is (603) 383-4200.